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ABSTRACT

The author reviews the history of international concerns regarding disabled persons, and suggests that a prime reason for society's discrimination and rejection of the disabled is fear. He describes the emphasis in the United States on rights and independence of disabled people and asserts that each country must build upon its own traditions, values, and philosophies to provide awareness information to its citizens. (CL)

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THE FOURTH WORLD: A CHALLENGE FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

BY

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The UNESCO World Conference of Actions and Strategies for Education, Prevention and Integration

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We gather together today in Spain to discuss national and international strategies which will lead to more effective prevention of disabilities, and to the full participation of the disabled in our national lives.

This setting provides a symbolic meaning for our work. From this nation in the "Old World" sailed the great explorers who discovered what has been called the new or "Second World". We look across the seas to neighbors who have been called the developing nations or the 'Third World". I would suggest to you that in each of our nations we can sail an internal voyage of exploration and discover a "Fourth World", a people only partly discovered, only partly recognized, only partly admitted to our ranks.

Across our national boundaries, across our cultures and throughout our different histories over centuries, the disabled have been and still are, a "Fourth World" - all too frequently relegated to positions of reduced value in our national and international lives.

Our varied histories will show how frequently we have rejected and discriminated against our disabled brothers and sisters. We have feared them, have attributed supernatural powers to them, reviled them and cast them out, made them objects of pity, of ridicule, of scorn.

This is not a problem solely of the First World, or of the Second World, or the Third World, there is a "Fourth World" on our globe.

Today we stand on a pinnacle of positive concern for the disabled. We celebrate an international year in a world congress involving representatives from many nations. We are able to report on programs of education, rehabilitation and health and we can speak of new national and international commitments to improve the lives of the disabled. We truly have come a great way.

I attended my first UNESCO Conference about five years ago and as we met in Paris for that one day of deliberations on "Awareness of the Disabled", there was much less progress than we can report this week. In the period since, many nations have strengthened their programs and increased markedly the integration of the disabled into their societies. UNESCO itself has moved from seeing the education of the disabled as a peripheral activity funded by voluntary donations by a few member states to a position where the program is now part of the regular budget of the organization.

In answering the topic which the Conference organizers requested I address, the implications for national action in the area of using information to strengthen public awareness of the rights and needs of persons who are disabled, we must begin by examining history and hope to understand its lessons. If disabled people comprise a Fourth World, why has it been so? Across cultures and across centuries the disabled have been subjected to discrimination, rejection and isolation.

Why has that been? What law of human nature has resulted in this behavior? Are we to assume it has all been a historical accident, that once past will not reoccur? Are we so enlightened today in this International Year of the Disabled that rejection of the disabled will no longer be a factor?

I think not - I think we must search out the causes for our societal behavior that operate today. Our behavior toward the disabled will be determined by today's beliefs, today's values, today's assumptions. We must, therefore, substitute new beliefs, new values and new assumptions for those which have resulted in past discrimination.

I believe the basic problem faced by the disabled historically, is that they have made us afraid. As human beings evolved, we have learned certain cautions. One is to be afraid of the unknown, of the strange, of the different. In a primitive world full of possible dangers we did not know what dangers lurked in strange places, in the dark, or in the hearts of strangers.

Perhaps, most specifically of all, as humans we do not know what lies behind life itself. As human beings we are finite, not immortal, we become old, ill and we die. For many of us these are frightening thoughts and we do not wish to dwell on them, we do not wish to face these truths. If disabled persons symbolize or represent our finiteness, if they stir in us these suppressed fears, then it is not surprising that we have excluded them from our tribes, from our schools, our places of work and leisure.

If our societies today see the disabled as weak, as sick, as helpless, as uneducable, as unemployable, then it seems likely that society will continue to exclude them, at most to offer them charity, not equality. Perceptions of this kind must be replaced by new perceptions. Old values are changed by adopting newer, stronger values.

In developing new information to develop what the Conference organizers have called "Awareness", we must express new values which supersede the old ones, provide new images that are stronger than the ones we seek to replace. We must understand that rational arguments are not always the strongest tools. Psychoanalysts and psychologists have helped us to understand that emotion, that feeling is usually more significant than reason and rationality in determining behavior. So we must find new values that have strong emotional roots, that express strongly held values.

In the United States in the last decade we have emphasized "rights" - the "right to education", the "right to treatment". We did not emphasize as strongly the appeals to charity. If charity grew out of concern for the weak and sick, we wanted to emphasize strength, action and intrinsic worth. This made sense in the United States at that point in our national history. Our efforts followed closely a historic change in our national policies toward minority populations. We tied our appeals to a deeply held value in our country - that each person deserved the chance to <u>succeed</u>, to <u>succeed</u>, not a chance to be dependent and be taken care of.

In our information we stressed disabled children learning, disabled adults working, paying taxes, leading "productive lives". This touched another deeply held American value - what has been called the "work ethic". Our national image, as we see ourselves that is, is that we work hard, we have a free enterprise system, we are a nation of immigrants who in 200 years have worked our way up. When you talk about giving people a chance to work, you touch a strongly held value among many citizens of the United States.

It seems to me that each nation will have its own traditions, values and prevailing philosophies which must provide the basis for its strengthened information. What are the best and strongest values in your nation - love of the family? - personal bravery? - whatever they may be, these are the values to portray.

For example, I spoke during this meeting with a delegate from Jordan concerning strongly held values in that nation. There is a deep sense of community that grows out of familial ties. Teachings of the Koran emphasize the interdependency of people. If a limb is injured, an arm or a leg, the whole body is affected, and so with people. This is not a concept limited to the disabled, it is a basic perspective of the society and goes beyond charity, toward interdependence of all people.

In his remarks honoring the late Nils Sundberg, who contributed so much to world efforts to educate the disabled, Senor Major spoke of the Spanish concept of a gentleman: A person who is revered most highly as the epitome of the high qualities in a Spanish man. We must understand and help others to understand that a man with a disability can be a gentleman in the fullest sense of this Spanish concept, not always the recipient of sympathy.

I mention prevailing philosophies because times change. An appeal to civil rights in the United States in the 1980's is not the same as such an appeal a decade ago, but there are newly emerging values to be recognized and used to assist the disabled.

In our stories, in our public statements, in our television advertisements and in other information media, we have tried to present new images of disabled people. We have presented images of independence, not dependence, images of involvement, not isolation, images of learning, not being treated for a sickness, images of work, not inactivity. These images expressed values we hoped would replace the old fears, would change the unknown into the known. We have tried to keep our efforts tied to major political themes so that whatever the change in government philosophies, there would be values concerning the disabled which were current and compatible with the current government policies.

None of this is perfectly effective or even very sophisticated, but it has seemed to work, not just in my land but in many nations. If we wish to excise fear and uncertainty, we must replace it with confidence and familiarity. If we fight centuries of tradition based on emotion, we must find new emotional expressions that can be substituted.

Our work is not easy but we are blessed with having seen that our efforts are succeeding. As a human race we are evolving in a more humane, compassionate and enlightened direction. The spectre of war is never too far from our vision, our history shows that all too clearly, but the work that we do expresses the best in the human spirit and so, each day we help bring about peace and harmony - we are fortunate indeed, to have this challenge and this opportunity.